

The Northern Fells Group is a community charity operating in seven very rural parishes on the eastern and northern edge of Skiddaw and Blencathra: Boltons, Caldbeck, Castle Sowerby, Ireby with Uldale, Mungrisdale, Sebergham & Welton, and Westward & Rosley.

Its aim is to 'fill the gaps' in community services for the area which covers approximately 200 square miles, with a population of around 3600.

Background

The Northern Fells Rural Project was one of HRH The Prince of Wales' three Rural Revival Initiative Projects, running from 1999 to 2002. The aims were to:

- Identify unmet health and social need
- Map existing services
- Pilot ways to improve services by 'filling gaps'
- Evaluate the project

The Project was hosted by Voluntary Action Cumbria (now ACTION with Communities in Cumbria), with the Project Co-ordinator seconded from her work as Practice Nurse at Caldbeck Surgery.

A number of initiatives were set up in response to needs researched through the project and a report published 'Under the Stones' - available at www.northernfellsgroup.org.uk. When the Project ended in 2002 the Northern Fells Group was formed to continue and develop its work.

The Project

With the success of the Project and the clear need for its voluntary services, the Trustees of the newly formed Northern Fells Group Charitable Trust were able to attract numerous sources of grant funding - full list available at www.northernfellsgroup.org.uk. Local donations and fundraising also became a valuable source of revenue.

The Northern Fells Group has 15 Trustees, including 1 from each of the 7 Parish Councils. A number of the Trustees are also volunteers for the Group's services. The Group is managed day to day by its Group Co-ordinator and Company Secretary, 25 hours a week, and helped by a Fundraising Co-ordinator 15 hours a week.

Services, most supported by grants and local fundraising and donations, include:



Flexible Minibus Service

Flexible Minibus Service for people of any age without transport. 24 voluntary drivers are organised into a rota by the two employed Transport Co-ordinators who work 5 hours a week each, taking bookings and maintaining the minibus. The fare is 35p a mile.

Lend a Hand Group for people who are ill or disabled and their carers. 18 volunteers are matched with clients by the employed Co-ordinator who works 10 hours a week on a very flexible basis. The volunteers provide handyman services and neighbourly domestic/personal help, including 'home from hospital' support. There is no charge for the service.

Benefits Awareness and help with forms. Help is given by an employed trained Benefits Support Worker who works a flexible 5 hours a week. No charge.

Village Agents - friendly, local contact in each parish helping people of all ages find the information and help they need, from our Group and other voluntary and statutory organisations. Employed for 8 hours a week each, working very flexible hours to meet the needs of clients.

Youth Activities - Holiday Activities (Easter and Summer) organised by a part time youth worker. Small charge for each activity.

Monthly Lunch Groups - nine groups hold lunches in pubs, restaurants or village halls, organised by volunteers, with the help and subsidy of the businesses concerned. One is entirely volunteer run, including the cooking.

Weekly Drop In for coffee and cake at Millhouse Village Hall. 2 volunteers each week bake and serve. (10 total, working on a rota). £1.50 charge

Monthly Drop In at Rosley, Westward and Bolton Low Houses. Volunteers bake and serve with help of Village Agents. £1 charge

Bi-monthly Nail Cutting Clinics at Rosley and Hesket Newmarket, in partnership with Age UK West Cumbria. £12 charge.

Medical Loan Service in partnership with British Red Cross, run by a Northern Fells volunteer. Voluntary donations invited for the service – for the Red Cross who clean and maintain the equipment.

Weekly Tai Chi class at Caldbeck. Organised by a volunteer, with paid teacher.

'Men in Sheds' twice weekly at Caldbeck. Shedmaster employed for 10 hours a week. £1 charge.

Other classes and events in response to need, organised by Village Agents.

What has been achieved?

In almost 15 years since the original project started, the Group has gone from strength to strength. It has drawn on a wonderful community spirit and channelled that spirit into reliable voluntary services for people in a sparsely populated rural area.

It has reduced isolation for people by providing easily accessible activities and transport. The numerous lunch groups, drop ins, and other activities all combine to reduce isolation and increase neighbourliness and wellbeing.

Last year the Benefits Service helped residents to claim £51,000 of low income and disability benefits.



Northern Fells Group Tea Dance

The Learning

- Value of paid and voluntary workers - it helps if paid workers are also local residents. They usually have an added insight into local issues and are more likely to be trusted.
- Importance of listening - to those using the services, volunteers, other residents, and other groups involved in similar activities elsewhere.
- Importance of coordinating and matching services to the skills and availability of volunteers.
- Co-operation with other agencies (voluntary and statutory) learning from their experience and sharing our own.
- Need for rapid access to funds. Quick, easy access, small amounts of start up funding.
- Living with the uncertainty of future funding and learning when to take risks, to develop a new service or go in a new direction.
- Importance of record keeping - funders, donors, and residents need to know how many people we are helping, their needs, and what we are doing to help them.

Contact Details

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